

St. Vincent Island - A Prospective National
Wildlife Refuge in Florida

A proposal is under consideration which could result in the acquisition by the United States of St. Vincent Island, a 12,000-acre tract of land in Franklin County, Florida.

The island, which is about nine miles long and four miles wide at the widest point, lies about 40 miles southeast of Panama City and about 80 miles southwest of Tallahassee, Florida. The island is a series of low sand ridges running northwest to southeast with low wet areas separating them. Most of the marshland is in the northeast part of the island and around the fresh water lakes in the southeast section. Vegetation is various associations of slash pine, live oak, cabbage palm, red cedar, magnolia, red bay, bayberry, rosemary and myrtle. Marsh areas support primarily cattail, sawgrass, spartina, and bull-rush.

The island is owned by the St. Vincent Island Company, a co-partnership of two brothers, Alfred L. and Henry Loomis, and their wives, who bought the property in 1948. The owners maintain a small year-round staff on the island and have used the property primarily as a recreation area for hunting, fishing, and relaxing, although they sold some pine pulpwood from 1960 to 1965 (the virgin timber was cut between 1940 and 1945). A previous owner some time before 1915 introduced various exotic animals of which sambur, eland, black buck and zebra are still found on the island. The present owners are proposing to dispose of the property in the near future.

The island currently supports wintering waterfowl in limited numbers. A potential exists for managing marsh and water areas to provide greatly increased capacity. Because of its unusual biotic characteristics, the island should have great potential for coordinated research on marine, estuarine, and terrestrial ecosystems typical of the region and for low-density recreational use. St. Vincent Island is one of only a few remaining large and ecologically and/or aesthetically significant islands still in private ownership. The unique character of this island should not be destroyed by commercial development.

The Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife has examined the island and is prepared to recommend its acquisition for migratory bird conservation purposes under the Migratory Bird Conservation Act subject to the approval of the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission and the State of Florida. It has been informally agreed that the Island, if acquired by the Bureau would be made accessible to the Smithsonian Institution for purposes of conducting research in ecology.

The Nature Conservancy has expressed an interest in assisting in the preservation of the island and the following proposal is under consideration. The Nature Conservancy would purchase the island from the present owners. Tentative agreement has been reached on \$2.2 million for the property. If the proposal were approved by the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission, The Nature Conservancy would sell the entire island to the United States for the approved price. The difference between the price paid by the United States and the cost to the Conservancy would be recovered by the Conservancy through a fund raising campaign.

There are some problem areas which have not been resolved completely. The payment by the Government to the Conservancy could not be made until it had conveyed a clear title to the United States. Payments by the Conservancy to the present owners in several installments would obstruct early clearance of the title, an essential step that must be taken before the Government can buy the land.

It will be necessary to obtain the State's approval under the procedures prescribed in its enabling legislation required under the Migratory Bird Conservation Act. Committing a substantial sum to this proposal in fiscal year 1968 would require a further cutback in the waterfowl production area program which is already operating on restricted funds.

The Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife has made a reconnaissance appraisal and tentatively placed a value of \$1,750,000 on the project. The figure is subject to change, depending on a more detailed appraisal to be made at a later date.

We believe that this proposed acquisition would be a worthwhile addition to the National Wildlife Refuge System, and is an opportunity in addition to make a great contribution to the Nation's store of unspoiled natural areas.